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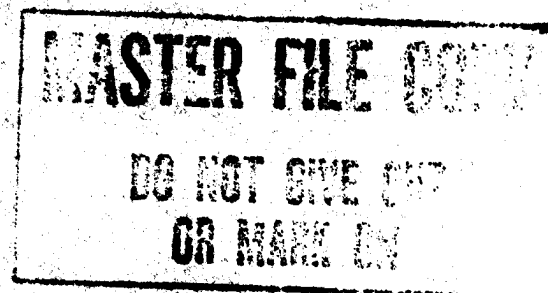
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The Polisario Front: Status and Prospects

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An Intelligence Assessment



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NESA 83-10081
April 1983

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The Polisario Front: Status and Prospects

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An Intelligence Assessment

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
Office of Near East-South Asian Analysis.
Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESA,

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This paper was coordinated with the Directorate of
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**The Polisario Front:
Status and Prospects**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 10 March 1983
was used in this report.*

Since late 1981 the Polisario Front has suffered major setbacks with its tactics that were intended to force Morocco to negotiate a settlement of the conflict in Western Sahara:

- The attack on the Moroccan outpost at Guelta Zemmur in October 1981 substantially strengthened US support for the Moroccans, much to the guerrillas' dismay.
- Admission to the OAU of the guerrillas' "state," a move initially considered by the Polisario as a diplomatic victory, cost the Front heavily in terms of international support because of the tactic's highly disruptive effect on the organization.

Although the guerrillas have not abandoned hope of a negotiated settlement to the war, they have decided that they must use arms to hasten progress toward a political conclusion. The Polisario probably will be unable to force the Moroccans to make significant concessions:

- Because of its strengthened military position in the Sahara, Morocco is less motivated to accommodate the guerrillas.
- The Polisario has lost the initiative on the battlefield and probably will not be able to devise a successful campaign that would sap Morocco's will to defend its claim to the Sahara.

The conflict appears likely to drag on, although at much reduced levels by comparison with the activity of the late 1970s. The Moroccans cannot completely contain the guerrilla threat, and the Polisario can continue to harass Moroccan forces almost indefinitely.

The obstacles hampering a negotiated settlement and the significant equities at stake for all parties suggest that flashpoints—probably involving US interests—are unavoidable over the longer term. The guerrillas may feel compelled to select options that could change the character of the dispute:

- Although the option now appears unlikely, the Polisario might conclude that internationalizing the conflict is the only way to succeed.
- Algeria will play a key role in limiting the guerrillas' options.

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The Polisario Front: Status and Prospects

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In October 1981 the Polisario Front achieved a major victory against Moroccan military forces at Guelta Zemmur in Western Sahara, inflicting on Morocco the biggest loss of men and materiel in a single engagement since the war began six years earlier. Shortly thereafter, the guerrillas won an equally important diplomatic victory by maneuvering to have the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic (SDAR)—the Polisario's state apparatus—seated at a ministerial meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), thus gaining a highly valued international credential.

Both achievements have turned into Pyrrhic victories, however, as Morocco has used the full force of its international ties and regional stature to blunt the Polisario's momentum. Since the attack at Guelta Zemmur, Morocco has gained increased military support from the United States, overcome weaknesses in its defensive strategy against the guerrillas, and fashioned a bloc of OAU members unwilling to accept the legitimacy of SDAR membership in the organization.

The conflict between the Polisario and Morocco has been essentially stalemated since Guelta Zemmur. Morocco is incapable of vanquishing definitively the Polisario, and King Hassan does not seem prepared to risk pursuing seriously an OAU-sponsored peace plan that could—if a proposed referendum were carried out honestly—result in independence for the disputed territory. The Polisario, on the other hand, is almost hamstrung by its lack of good military options and by the somewhat mercurial nature of the support from its key patrons, Algeria and Libya, upon whom most of the Front's successes have depended.

The deadlock generally serves Morocco's interests. It has had the effect of significantly reducing the amount of actual conflict and creating the impression—particularly among the Moroccan public—that Rabat is in control and has won the key "battles," if

not the war. This impression obscures the important fact that the Polisario shows no sign of weakening its resolve in its struggle to control the Western Sahara and can survive its current misfortunes so long as it retains its backing from Algeria.

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The Polisario Front: Down But Not Out

The Polisario's efforts since 1981 to use bold military and political actions to force concessions and negotiations from Morocco have by all measures failed. The strategy was based on the somewhat ill-conceived premise that the Front would be able to execute a series of dramatic military and political victories over Morocco that would shake Moroccan confidence enough to produce significant concessions. The Front has paid dearly for overestimating its abilities and miscalculating both Morocco's determination to prevail in Western Sahara and King Hassan's formidable diplomatic talents. In the wake of their victory at Guelta Zemmur, the guerrillas have watched King Hassan turn defeat into a successful bid for greater military support from the United States and greater diplomatic support from Arab and African states.

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The results of the recent past have been disappointing but not disheartening for the Polisario. The Front seems to be preparing to persevere militarily and to do so by employing a variety of tactics, from traditional guerrilla operations to attacks with conventional forces.

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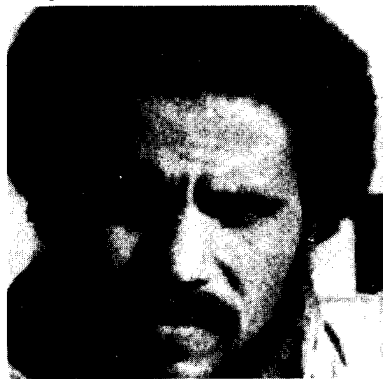
Debates before and during the Polisario's Fifth Congress in Tindouf in October 1982 reportedly were heated, but the militant faction headed by Front Secretary General Abdelaziz (who is also President of the SDAR), prevailed.

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Saharan Democratic Arab Republic (SDAR)**Mohamed Abdelaziz****Mahjoub Laroussi****President**

Mohamed Abdelaziz

Council of Ministers^a

Prime Minister - Mahjoub Laroussi
(Mahfoud Ali Beiba)

Ministers

Defense - Ibrahim Ghali Ould Moustapha
Foreign Affairs - Ibrahim Hakim
Education - Mohamed al-Amin Ould Ahmed
Justice - Mohamed Ould Ziou
Interior - Abdelkader Taleb Omar

Secretary of State
for Commerce - Kenti Ould Jouda

Secretary of State
for Health - Nerna Ould Joumani

Saharan National Council

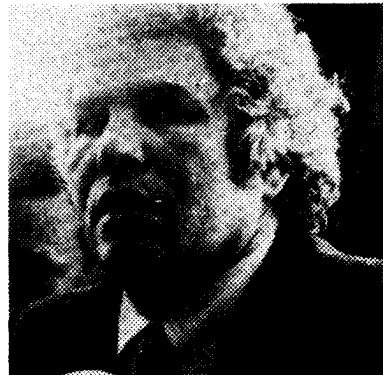
Politburo - 25 members

Permanent Secretariat comprises:

Permanent Secretary
Walis (governors) of Dakhla, El Aaiun,
and Semara
Heads of women, labor, and student
organizations

Daira (refugee camp) representatives - 20
members

^a Reorganization announced 4 November 1982

Ibrahim Ghali Ould Moustapha**Ibrahim Hakim****Mohamed al-Amin Ould Ahmed**

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Table 1
Polisario Front

	Name	Title
Executive Committee	Mohamed Abdelaziz	Secretary General
	Bashir Mustapha Siyed	Deputy Secretary General
	Mohamed Abdelaziz	Secretary General and President of SDAR
	Ibrahim Ghali Ould Moustapha	SDAR Minister of Defense
	Bashir Mustapha Siyed	Deputy Secretary General
	Mohamed al-Amin Ould Ahmed ^a	SDAR Minister of Education
	Mahjoub Laroussi (Mahfoud Ali Beiba)	SDAR Prime Minister
	Ayyub al-Habib	
Revolutionary Command Council ^b	Mohamed al-Amin Bouhali	
	Mohamed Abdelaziz	
	Mahjoub Laroussi	
	Ibrahim Ghali Ould Moustapha	
Committee for External Affairs ^c	Mohamed al-Amin Ould Ahmed ^a	
	Mohamed Salem Ould Salek	

^a The reassignment of al-Amin as Minister of Education may also have affected his position on the RCC. The new Minister of Interior, Abdelkader Taleb Omar, may be the fourth member in his stead.

^b The constitution of the SDAR stipulates that the Executive Committee shall fulfill the function of this council until the first general popular congress after the "recovery of sovereignty."

^c Salem is chairman; other members are unknown.

A minority within the ruling hierarchy, [] holds that the Polisario would do better to modify its hardline position of demanding direct negotiations with Morocco and look for a mutually acceptable compromise. The majority, however, has come to believe that armed struggle is not only the principal tool for bargaining with Morocco but is the glue holding the Front together and keeping it from obscurity. We do not believe that any faction within the Front has considered terminating the struggle or is likely to in the foreseeable future. Conditions would have to be extremely dire—the loss of Algeria as a sanctuary, the cutoff of all outside economic and military aid, and severe attrition in the ranks—before the Polisario would abandon its efforts.

The toughening of the Polisario's mentality and the shift away from failed strategies have not inspired a new vision for defeating Morocco. The current quiescence in the dispute is explained in part by the Polisario's preoccupation with developing viable military options. [] the Polisario, at the insistence of Algeria and Libya, refrained from significant military actions last year in order to give OAU efforts to arrange a cease-fire and referendum a better chance of success. []

Military Options

Despite grandiose rhetoric, the Polisario leadership probably now has a fairly realistic appreciation of

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Morocco's superior strength and the limits and liabilities the Front faces in virtually all of its choices for challenging that superiority. The deepening realization that the struggle is likely to be long and exacting and that the Moroccans cannot be intimidated or deterred easily but must be worn down, will probably result in an eclectic approach, with the mainstay of a renewed campaign being small-unit harassing attacks.

The Moroccan berm—the earthen defensive perimeter built since 1980¹—and other improvements in Moroccan defenses will make small-unit attacks less effective than they once were; however, such attacks still can exact Moroccan casualties and rattle morale.

The berm, Moroccan airstrikes by Mirage F-1s, and better detection capabilities are the primary problems the guerrillas are trying to work around.

an increase in nighttime operations to take advantage of the Moroccan Air Force's reluctance, and inadequate preparation, for battlefield support missions in the dark.

The guerrillas now have the option to undertake conventional warfare and will probably—in very selected instances—combine such operations with hit-and-run missions. Over the past two years the Polisario has accumulated an impressive modern inventory of heavy armaments; its holding of medium tanks, for example, equals about 70 percent of the Moroccan Army's inventory.

The Polisario is probably not yet well prepared for larger, conventional-style operations. Base camps outside Tindouf which appear to have a training function—Ghour Bouret, Aalfa, Oudiane Lemkhaf, and Oued Tatrati—are providing instruction primarily in small-unit infantry operations. Combined arms training—involving tank and armored infantry combat vehicle platoons and field artillery—have been seen at

Table 2

Polisario Front: Inventory of Major Armaments^a

	Estimate of Number ^b
Medium tanks (probably T-54/55)	70
BMP armored infantry combat vehicles	35
BTR-60 armored personnel carriers	25
Cascavel armored reconnaissance vehicles	18
BRDM-2 armored reconnaissance vehicles	12
BM-11/BM-21/RM-70 multiple rocket launchers	11
D-30 122-mm howitzer	Unknown
ZU-23 23-mm antiaircraft guns	Unknown
SA-6 launchers	2
SA-7 missile launchers	Unknown
SA-9 launchers	3

^a Excludes items captured from the Moroccans and held near Tindouf. For logistic reasons the guerrillas have made no appreciable effort to integrate this equipment into their units.

^b These figures represent a minimum estimate of the guerrillas' holdings.

Oudiane Lemkhaf several times since October 1982.

Other risks associated with large conventional operations will limit their role in a renewed Polisario campaign. These include:

- High casualties for a force that cannot afford sacrificing many of its best trained men.
- The vulnerability of massed formations of armor to Moroccan airpower, which probably cannot be totally repulsed by the Polisario's limited air defenses.
- Greater chances of detection.

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*Polisario troops in parade formation*

Franz Furst ©

The Polisario's acquisition of tanks and armored personnel carriers was almost certainly intended for major operations against the berm, which in itself can be breached at a number of points without much difficulty. But with Moroccan forces behind the berm either stationed along the wall in defensive outposts or heavily concentrated in a few positions—at Semara, El Aauin, and Bu Craa—the guerrillas have no easy targets. A successful assault on one of the smaller positions along the barrier would have only marginal military and political impact. An attack on one of the towns or major military encampments presents great hazards with regard to a safe withdrawal of slow-moving armor through narrow channels and may, in any case, require more forces than the Polisario is willing to risk on one venture.

There are few desirable targets outside the berm. Within Western Sahara, Dakhla alone remains beyond the protection of the main defensive perimeter. As for attacks on garrisons in southern Morocco, the

Polisario would have to gain permission from Algeria—which is unlikely to cooperate. In both instances, the Polisario would be taking on significant, perhaps even prohibitive, logistical challenges.

The Polisario is unlikely at this time to put together a battle plan that can do serious harm to the Moroccan military

it is quite possible that Libya would supply the Front with FROGs, which would permit the guerrillas

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Military training for Polisario women

Franz Furst ©

to strike targets well inside the berm. The possibility of the guerrillas developing an air capability is remote.

The Polisario may seek to circumvent the berm by traversing Algerian territory and entering the "useful triangle"—the economic and political heartland of the Western Sahara—from the north.

Algers closed the route to deflate Moroccan charges of direct involvement in the war and to prevent such violations of Moroccan

borders from being used to short-circuit peace negotiations. The Algerian leadership will, in our view, maintain this strict posture with the Polisario as long as there is hope of movement in negotiations, but it might turn a blind eye to Polisario activity if Morocco proves recalcitrant in negotiations or if relations with Rabat cool for other reasons.

The Polisario almost certainly will launch a concerted effort to block, delay, and increase the costs of Moroccan plans to extend the berm from Semara south to the Mauritanian border and from Zaag to Mahbes. The proposed expansion of the berm would hinder Polisario access to its rear bases at Tindouf, substantially lengthen lines of communication, and force the guerrillas to transit northern Mauritania. The Moroccan project will be costly, however, and will give the guerrillas broad opportunities for harassment.

Terrorism

Understanding that a successful war effort against Morocco depends in part on chipping away at the morale of Moroccan troops, the guerrillas may be more willing to use terrorist activities now that they are less able to confront the Moroccans directly.

US intervention in the Saharan war might cause the guerrillas to view destabilization operations in Morocco as a legitimate and viable military option. The reasons for the Polisario not engaging in terrorism over the years have not been entirely clear. In our view, the guerrillas have the ability but have elected not to exercise it, perhaps for fear of losing what little international support they have.

Terrorist attacks carried out behind Moroccan lines inside the Sahara would presumably be less controversial than in Morocco itself, and the guerrillas might try these first to test reactions.

Moroccan forces behind the berm have become complacent about their physical security and

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Polisario troops on patrol



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could be vulnerable to sabotage in major bivouac areas or the key Moroccan-occupied towns. The Moroccans have also been lax about protecting their fighter aircraft based in the Sahara, and a well-executed raid or mortar attack on El Aaiun could cause devastating losses to the Moroccan Air Force. Polisario commandos, who have attacked fishing trawlers off the coast of Western Sahara, might succeed in penetrating Moroccan defenses at El Aaiun or Dakhla despite Moroccan precautions.

Outside Help

Algeria's support is critical to the survival of the Polisario, and changes in Algiers's attitude toward the conflict have had a direct impact on the Polisario's strategies and options. Algeria, in our opinion, is committed to the Polisario as a matter of both principle and self-interest. The right of self-determination—a principle in which the Polisario has totally wrapped itself—remains the centerpiece of Algeria's postrevolutionary ideology. Even though the country's more pragmatic leaders under Bendjedid may not hold the principle as dearly as their predecessors, they cannot afford the appearance of any slackening of commitment, particularly to a liberation movement

with historical and ethnic connections to Algeria. A more compelling and perhaps more durable underpinning to the Algerian commitment to the Polisario is Algeria's deep-seated rivalry with Morocco for North African predominance and thus its determination to keep the Sahara from being incorporated by its competitor. Indeed, the process of keeping that from happening—supporting the Polisario in a costly and debilitating conflict—seemed to be an end in itself under the Boumediene regime.

Algiers seems more willing to pursue a diplomatic solution to the Sahara dispute and has generally counseled the Polisario in that direction. There is no evidence, however, that the Algerians are willing to compromise on anything other than tactical matters. They want the implementation of the OAU plan for a referendum in the Sahara, which they fully expect to produce a vote for an independent state.

The Algerians apparently are concerned about the Polisario's current dilemma and are not enthusiastic about the prospects for a renewed military campaign.

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Algerians believe that the guerrillas can no longer hurt the Moroccan military because of the Moroccans' successful static defense and because of desertions and looser discipline within the guerrilla movement. [REDACTED]

Increased direct contact between Moroccan and Algerian officials, including a summit meeting between King Hassan and President Bendjedid in late February, has generated greater hopes in Algiers that negotiations might be stepped up. The nascent dialogue between the two sides, however, is probably only steps away from revealing the incompatibility of their positions on how to proceed with the OAU-sponsored peace plan or with other negotiating gambits. [REDACTED]

Algerian constraints on the guerrillas will make it difficult for the Polisario to launch an aggressive military campaign. Nonetheless, the Algerians will continue, in our opinion, to supply safehaven, arms, and other equipment to the guerrilla movement, and will not prevent renewed conflict so long as it is deemed an advantageous form of pressure for negotiations. [REDACTED]

Libya, the Polisario's other key patron, has provided most of the Polisario's major weapons systems—armor, SA-6 missiles, and multiple rocket launchers—and probably will be willing to continue underwriting the guerrillas' challenge to Morocco on the battlefield. In the past Libya has not been a very reliable supporter of the Polisario. Qadhafi evidently suspended assistance to the guerrillas for a time as part of a rapprochement with Morocco intended to restore diplomatic relations and secure the King's support for Qadhafi's leadership of the OAU. The agreement between the two countries did not last long, and the Libyans resumed helping the Polisario. The experience underscored Qadhafi's unreliability and the importance of Algeria as the Polisario's primary benefactor and the only one capable of providing sustained safehaven and logistical support. [REDACTED]

Closer Moroccan-US ties, particularly military cooperation agreements, and Rabat's support for anti-Qadhafi oppositionists probably will ensure Libya's

continued and more regular assistance to the Polisario. Algeria can control the Libyan-Polisario relationship, however, and would not permit collaboration that would in any way hurt Algerian interests. This includes ruling on transit rights for Libyan weapons bound for the Polisario and requiring other forms of Libyan assistance to the guerrillas and their dependents to pass through Algerian checkpoints. [REDACTED]

The *Soviet Union* has made overtures to the Polisario offering direct assistance, including weapons. The guerrillas have been reluctant to establish a direct link with Moscow for fear it would jeopardize the all-important relationship with the Algerians, who want to avoid internationalizing the dispute. Algiers, in our view, is motivated by a variety of factors, chief among which are:

- A desire to reduce its own reliance on the Soviet Union and to improve relations with the United States.
- A concern that Soviet investment in the Polisario would only elicit greater US aid to Morocco and could push Morocco and Algeria into direct confrontation.
- A belief that Algerian objectives can be achieved without the risk and diminution of control that a direct Polisario-Soviet link would entail.

The Polisario's reserve toward the Soviet Union stems from the assumption that Algeria can and will maintain the liberation movement through to victory. This assumption has recently been shaken by increased US assistance to Morocco, which the guerrillas see as a prime cause of their current misfortunes. The Polisario has openly threatened to seek Soviet help, but [REDACTED] it is ambivalent about following through. Although we believe it unlikely at this point, the Polisario may eventually calculate that internationalizing the dispute and accepting Soviet assistance is the only way to succeed and that Algeria—although it has great leverage over the Polisario—cannot for domestic political reasons afford to exercise it fully. [REDACTED]

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The *Cubans* could serve, to some extent, as an alternative to the Soviets. Although the Polisario has rebuffed most offers of military aid from Cuba, it has accepted some assistance. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We have been unable to confirm Moroccan charges that large numbers of Cuban advisers have operated with the Polisario in the Western Sahara. A significant escalation of Cuban assistance to the Front would be viewed by Algeria in much the same way as close Soviet-Polisario ties and thus would present the guerrilla leadership with similar risks. We do not believe the Polisario will defy Algeria unless its prospects fail to improve. [REDACTED]

Mauritania has not officially provided any assistance to the Polisario, but it has been unable to prevent the guerrillas from using its territory. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] President Haidalla, while sympathetic to the guerrillas' cause, wants to remain outside the conflict, as do important elements of the largely black armed forces, who see it as an intra-Arab squabble.

[REDACTED] Beyond its official position, however, the Mauritians recognize that they cannot prevent the guerrillas from using the northern reaches of their country. [REDACTED]

Outlook

The current stalemate may well continue for months as the Polisario considers its options and consults with Algeria as to the most appropriate next move. Despite the renewed dialogue between Algerian and Moroccan leaders, there is little ground for optimism about a negotiated settlement soon. [REDACTED]

The OAU has been buffeted by the maneuvering of Morocco and its supporters and the pro-Polisario camp led by Algeria and Libya, with the majority of members angered over how the Saharan issue has divided the organization and reduced its ability to function. (The Saharan dispute and the issue of Chad twice contributed to the failure of the OAU to hold its

19th annual summit.) The OAU committee designated to implement the organization's settlement plan has made no headway in over a year. Other than the general concepts of a cease-fire and referendum, little has been agreed upon:

- Because Morocco does not recognize the Polisario as a party to the dispute, a cease-fire between the two sides is blocked.
- The definition of the voting population in the Sahara is a subject of broad disagreement and has stymied plans for the referendum.
- The composition of an interim administration and peacekeeping force and their respective missions have yet to be worked out. [REDACTED]

Both Morocco and Algeria seem to see their present interests best served by revitalizing the negotiating process, but Morocco shows no sign of modifying its position on the final disposition of the territory. Moreover, King Hassan, in our view, has little leeway with his domestic constituency even if he personally were prepared to concede some of Morocco's claims.

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Saudi King Fahd, an acceptable negotiator to all sides, apparently has tried to act as go-between during his recent visits to Algeria and Morocco. Saudi Arabia's substantial aid program to Morocco gives it considerable leverage in that quarter; however, the Saudis generally have avoided mediating roles that require sustained effort and application of pressure. Although the Algerian and Moroccan desire to create

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the appearance of progress in negotiations might breathe life into one or more of these efforts, prospects for a solution are dim. []

During the seeming dormancy of the conflict, a number of developments are likely to occur that could make the dispute more dangerous for the parties involved. The Polisario is likely to be forced over time to choose options that would significantly change the character of the dispute. []

Morocco's ability to sustain the cost of the war could deteriorate, perhaps seriously. The Moroccan economy, which has been going downhill for the past two years, probably will not improve in the foreseeable future. Grumbling over bread-and-butter issues is likely to intensify, particularly in large urban centers. []

The average Moroccan does not associate his economic woes directly with the Saharan conflict; however, his plight does shake his confidence in the government and possibly the King. Moreover, should the illusion that Morocco has already acquired the Western Sahara be shattered by significant Polisario successes on the battlefield or in a campaign of terrorism, economic unhappiness among Moroccans is likely to take on a distinctly political coloration. Even without notable Polisario actions, Morocco's claims of sovereignty over the Sahara may become an exploitable issue by either Islamic militants or leftists who could inflame economic and social discontent with charges that the regime has not fulfilled the country's historic and nationalist aspirations. []

Algeria is the only key player who may be motivated both to contain the potential for renewed fighting and to push negotiations forward, perhaps even into the realm of serious interchange. Algerian leaders, in our view, are currently reassessing key national interests and the policy directions best suited to serve these interests. Regional stability, internal social and economic development, and more balanced relations with the superpowers have clearly been elevated in the list of national priorities. Whether they have eclipsed or modified longstanding aspirations for regional dominance and sympathy for the revolutionary ideals of the independence movement is not clear. []

Certainly Algerian leaders in the past year have demonstrated real interest in improving relations with Morocco, a willingness to restrain the Polisario without offering alternative hope or help toward the guerrillas' ultimate goal, and a forthright pursuit of better relations with the United States, despite significant increases in US assistance and commitment to Morocco. What remains untested is how broadly these efforts are supported and whether they are tactical experiments or the products of more permanent changes in Algeria's outlook. []

Implications for the United States

Efforts by Morocco and Algeria—and to some extent even the Polisario—to keep the Western Sahara conflict from being "internationalized" have worked to the benefit of the United States. Although the special relationship between the United States and Morocco and recent increases in US military assistance to Rabat have occasionally elicited charges that Washington is playing an interventionist role, the dispute is still widely regarded as localized and is unlikely to cloud broader US interests in the region. Algeria's concerted effort over the past year to improve ties with the United States demonstrates that the conflict may constrain but not prevent better relations. []

Algeria's attitude—particularly toward the United States—will be the key factor in limiting the possible liabilities that the conflict could present to the United States. So long as the Algerians keep a relatively tight rein on the Polisario, there is little likelihood that the guerrillas can challenge Morocco seriously in ways that could destabilize the country in the near term. Moreover, Algeria's current posture would seem to guarantee that the conflict will not escalate into a broader war between Morocco and Algeria or seriously test the depth of the US commitment to Morocco. []

If Algeria's policy were to change as a result of domestic problems or a shift in leadership, or out of concern over aggressive Moroccan tactics, the Polisario could become a convenient instrument, both in the military and diplomatic context, to use against Morocco. A deepening alliance between the United

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States and Morocco that seemed to threaten Algeria's status as a dominant North African power or to ensure Morocco's prospects for totally absorbing the Western Sahara might also instigate a significant shift in Algerian attitude and policy. Although none of these possibilities seems likely in the near term, the lack of a clear-cut path to a negotiated settlement of the Saharan dispute and the significant equities at stake for all of the major participants in the conflict suggest that dangerous flashpoints—probably involving US interests—are unavoidable over the longer term. [REDACTED]

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The Saharan conflict could become a serious economic and political problem for the Moroccan monarchy if the dispute is not settled on terms acceptable to the Moroccan public or if at least the appearance of a Moroccan military victory cannot be established. During the course of such a protracted struggle, King Hassan would probably seek assistance from the United States in ways unacceptable to Algeria, and the risk of direct Algerian-Moroccan clashes would increase. [REDACTED]

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Appendix

Evolution of the Polisario Front, 1973-82

Early History

The Polisario Front was established in May 1973 by members of the Sahara Liberation Front, who had joined forces as students five years earlier in Rabat to protest Madrid's control of Spanish Sahara. The violent quashing by Spanish police of a political demonstration in El Aaiun in June 1970 helped to galvanize the group into a guerrilla organization that formally adopted the name *Frente Popular par la Liberacion de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro* at the first congress in 1973. [REDACTED]

From the outset, the Polisario's primary objectives were to terminate foreign domination of Saharan territory and to create an independent socialist Arab republic.² The coup in Portugal in April 1974 unexpectedly brightened prospects for achieving that goal when the new government in Lisbon announced its intention to divest itself of its African territories. Spain, Portugal's fellow colonial power, was unwilling to remain isolated on the continent and soon announced plans for a referendum on self-determination for its largest African territory, Spanish Sahara. (Spain also held the Canary Islands and two exclaves in Morocco—Ceuta and Melilla.) [REDACTED]

Spain's plan aroused the territorial ambitions of Morocco and Mauritania. King Hassan of Morocco began a determined campaign to "regain" the territory, over which Moroccan rulers had varying degrees of control as far back as the 10th century. The Moroccans maintained that at independence in 1956 they had not recovered from the colonial powers all of their rightful land holdings, including the Spanish Sahara. Mauritania likewise drew on historical associations—tribal affiliations and shared language—to lay claim to the territory. The initial rivalry between Rabat and Nouakchott for Spanish Sahara evolved into a cautious partnership by early 1974, when the

[REDACTED]

two countries agreed in principle to partition the territory. In mid-1974 Morocco initiated a major military buildup on its southern frontier, signaling its willingness to use force to reinforce its "rights" of sovereignty. [REDACTED]

Algeria, although without pretensions to Spain's North African possession, was not eager to see Morocco absorb Spanish Sahara, given Morocco's continuing irredentist claims to Algerian territory and a longstanding regional rivalry. Algeria favored self-determination for the Spanish possession and strongly denounced the Madrid Agreements signed by Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania in November 1975. The agreement designated Morocco and Mauritania as inheritors of the territory once Spain pulled out in late February 1976. That accord prompted a sharp increase in support for the Polisario Front by Algiers, which was already giving limited material and political assistance. [REDACTED]

Polisario guerrillas, who had conducted small-scale raids on Spanish troops in remote outposts during 1974 and 1975, switched their attention to the threat from Morocco and Mauritania. Heavily outnumbered, they could not prevent the takeover of the territory, but the Polisario was able to carry out successful harassment and sabotage against the new occupiers. Moroccan troops were unprepared for such strong resistance and soon had their hands full trying to cope with the guerrilla war in southern Morocco and Western Sahara. Mauritania, clearly the junior partner, came under pressure from the insurgents, who sought to make the burden of the war unbearable for Nouakchott. By mid-1978 Morocco was left to fight the war with the guerrillas by itself after a military coup in Mauritania brought to power leaders who wanted no further involvement in the Saharan dispute. [REDACTED]

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Algerian military units apparently were directly involved in only one clash in Western Sahara in early 1976. The battle at Amgala in early 1976 raised the specter of the insurgency escalating into a broader confrontation between Moroccan and Algerian military forces, something that both then Algerian President Boumediene and King Hassan wished to avoid. Algeria thereafter participated in the war solely by proxy, while further strengthening its forces along its western frontier so that Morocco would be deterred from hot pursuit or preemptive raids into Algerian territory. [REDACTED]

The Polisario Front has never expected to vanquish the Moroccans on the battlefield, and its military and political campaigns have always been aimed at persuading King Hassan to recognize the legitimacy of the guerrillas' claims and negotiate a settlement. As it worked to bolster its diplomatic credentials, the Polisario simultaneously sought to make the armed struggle in the Sahara a serious liability for Hassan, on the assumption that the King would never make concessions if Morocco had the upper hand. [REDACTED]

For much of the fighting in the late 1970s, the guerrillas' activities kept the Moroccan military on the defensive, despite the Moroccans' clear-cut advantages in manpower and weaponry. Wily Polisario fighters proved particularly adept at modifying their tactics to counter changes in Moroccan strategy. When the Moroccans organized massive sweeps of the desert to hunt down guerrillas and destroy supply caches and bases, the Polisario temporarily evacuated the areas, to return when the task forces had moved on. Then, when the Moroccan military clustered its forces in a few towns and gave up trying to patrol the vast expanses of Western Sahara, the guerrillas expanded their strike forces so that they could overrun garrisons. By 1979 the Polisario had the Moroccan forces on the run, and Moroccan military morale had sunk to dangerously low levels. [REDACTED]

Changing Political and Military Strategies

Before Morocco's poor showing against the insurgents could crystallize into a major problem for the throne—as a direct threat from war-weary armed forces or by forcing the Moroccans into a “humiliating” treaty—Hassan authorized changes in military

operations that by mid-1980 substantially improved Morocco's military fortunes. Unable to regain quickly the initiative that had been lost to the Polisario, the Moroccan military managed at least to deny the guerrillas some of the victories possible the preceding year. [REDACTED]

The Moroccans also made a strategic decision that had profound implications for the conduct of the war. Rabat ordered the construction of a berm around the economic and political heart of the disputed territory—the so-called useful triangle. No independent Saharan state could hope to be economically viable without this core area, with its extensive phosphate deposits and mines. Behind the earthen wall, the Moroccans decided to consolidate their forces so that the Polisario would no longer have its pick of isolated outposts and garrisons to harass. [REDACTED]

While the guerrillas contemplated the implications of a defensive perimeter, there were other developments that caused the Polisario to reevaluate its situation. Perhaps the most significant was the Polisario's perception of a shift in Algerian attitudes, which seemed to be showing increasing impatience with the prolonged hostilities and a greater eagerness to have the dispute settled. By mid-1981 the Polisario evidently had become deeply concerned about the state of its relations with Algeria. One high-ranking Polisario official averred that Algeria no longer supported the war with any enthusiasm, that it was looking for ways to extricate itself from its relationship with the guerrillas, and that it was prepared to seek a political solution at any price. This change of heart, the Polisario feared, could express itself in a cutoff of military aid and in greater restraints on guerrilla operations. [REDACTED]

Concurrently, the guerrillas learned that their other benefactor, Libyan leader Qadhafi, had promised King Hassan that he would curb arms assistance to the Polisario in exchange for normalized relations with Rabat and Hassan's assurance that Morocco would assent to Qadhafi's nomination as chairman of the Organization of African Unity in 1982. The Libyans apparently hastened delivery of a large shipment of armor and multiple rocket launchers to the

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Polisario before the agreement went into effect, but the guerrillas were upset by Qadhafi's willingness to jettison his relationship with the Front for Libyan self-interest. Although the Libyans resumed arms shipments by March 1982, and perhaps even earlier, the experience left a bad taste with the guerrillas and provided a harsh reminder of the undependable nature of this major ally [redacted]

Finally, King Hassan achieved diplomatic triumphs in the summer of 1981 that were major disappointments for the Polisario. Making an appearance at an OAU conclave for the first time in six years, Hassan pledged at the summit meeting in Nairobi in June 1981 to abide by a cease-fire and to hold a referendum in Western Sahara as called for the year before by the "Wise Men's Committee," an OAU group designated to mediate the dispute. This permitted Rabat to appear committed to a peaceful solution to the conflict, yet run little risk of jeopardizing Moroccan equities. Another bonus from the Moroccan point of view was that it preempted attempts by the Polisario to have the SDAR, which by then had been recognized by a simple majority of the OAU's members, admitted to the organization. [redacted]

In the follow-on meeting in Nairobi in August, the resolution set forth by the committee organized in June to implement the cease-fire and referendum was viewed by the Polisario as likely to help Morocco prevail. According to the US Embassy in Rabat, Hassan managed "both to retain the initiative and to build further momentum toward a denouement favorable to his interests." Morocco "seized the high ground" by telling the committee it was willing to proceed at any time, which put the onus on the Polisario and its supporters for delays caused by discussions of the terms of conducting a vote. [redacted]

The guerrillas believed that Hassan's diplomatic strategy in mid-1981 was designed to throw the Polisario Front off balance, win more international support for Rabat's position, and capitalize on Algeria's desire to end the war. Because this ploy seemed to be working and the war had become much less a problem for Rabat, the Polisario concluded it had to do something to recapture the momentum. At the suggestion of a ranking Front ideologue, the Polisario

decided first to try to garner more international backing for its cause and to establish links to Moroccan opposition parties, specifically the socialists and Communists. [redacted]

Guelta Zemmur—A Turning Point

[redacted] The guerrillas selected the Guelta Zemmur outpost, which they had struck earlier in 1981, as their target because of its remote and vulnerable position outside the berm. Although the Moroccans detected signs of an impending attack in early October 1981, elements of the 4th Motorized Regiment—comprising three infantry battalions with supporting artillery—took no special precautions. Consequently, the Polisario displaced the Moroccans and inflicted heavy losses on the garrison in the battle that began on 13 October. The US defense attache estimated that the fighting in the initial assault over the next week cost the Moroccans at least a full battalion's worth of equipment and roughly 300 casualties [redacted]

The key aspect of the battle at Guelta Zemmur was the Polisario's use of the SA-6 missile system, which was responsible for downing five Moroccan aircraft. Because Hassan adroitly portrayed the introduction of SA-6s into the war as a grave new threat to Morocco, a Polisario official later characterized the outcome at Guelta Zemmur as an incontestable military victory, but a political and strategic failure. He noted that the Moroccan monarch had masterfully created the impression that the Polisario used equipment of a sophistication that would have required foreign military advisers and the active involvement of Algeria and Mauritania, thereby enhancing Hassan's case for an increase in US military assistance to Morocco. [redacted]

Prospects for a peaceful solution to the conflict dimmed perceptibly in the aftermath. Morocco could cite the attack on Guelta Zemmur as proof that the Polisario, having blatantly violated the cease-fire stipulated at Nairobi in June, was insincere about continuing the peace process. When a meeting of the

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OAU implementation committee was called in February 1982, Hassan refused to attend. Neither the Moroccans nor the guerrillas were happy with the recommendations of the committee. Because the contentious issue of defining parties to the dispute was again avoided, the Polisario reiterated that it must negotiate directly with Morocco, a position that the Moroccans flatly rejected. Rabat also dismissed the committee's more detailed proposals on the interim administration and referendum because they would weaken Morocco's ability to retain control of the territory. [redacted]

The surprise seating of a delegation of the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic at an OAU ministerial meeting in late February 1982 dealt the already stalemated peace process another blow. Protesting the admission of the Polisario "state" as the OAU's newest member, Morocco and 18 other African governments organized a boycott that blocked movement toward an OAU-sponsored solution to the Saharan problem and disrupted the organization's meetings over the next several months. This cleavage in the OAU's ranks also stymied the 19th summit meeting scheduled in Tripoli last August, although disgruntlement over the selection of Qadhafi as chairman also helped to keep some of the "Group of 19" away. [redacted]

With the collapse of the Tripoli summit, more of the OAU's members believed that the organization should no longer be held hostage by a single issue, particularly an Arab dispute. A six-member contact group, established at the meeting in Tripoli to seek ways to reconvene the summit, met with various OAU members and concluded in late September that the SDAR issue endangered the OAU's continued existence. The group agreed that it was important for the summit to be reconvened by the end of 1982 and that to be able to do so, the Polisario must not participate in either the preceding Council of Ministers meeting or the summit itself. [redacted]

Anticipating that they would be asked to absent themselves from a rescheduled OAU summit, the Polisario Front agreed in mid-September that they would forgo participation, provided certain conditions were met. [redacted]

The Polisario, however, did not get all it wanted. Following consultations with its supporters, the Front concluded it had little choice but to announce its temporary abstention from all meetings of a reconvened summit. The contact committee also recommended placement on the summit's agenda of the report of the implementation committee on Western Sahara in order to revive the languishing peace process. [redacted]

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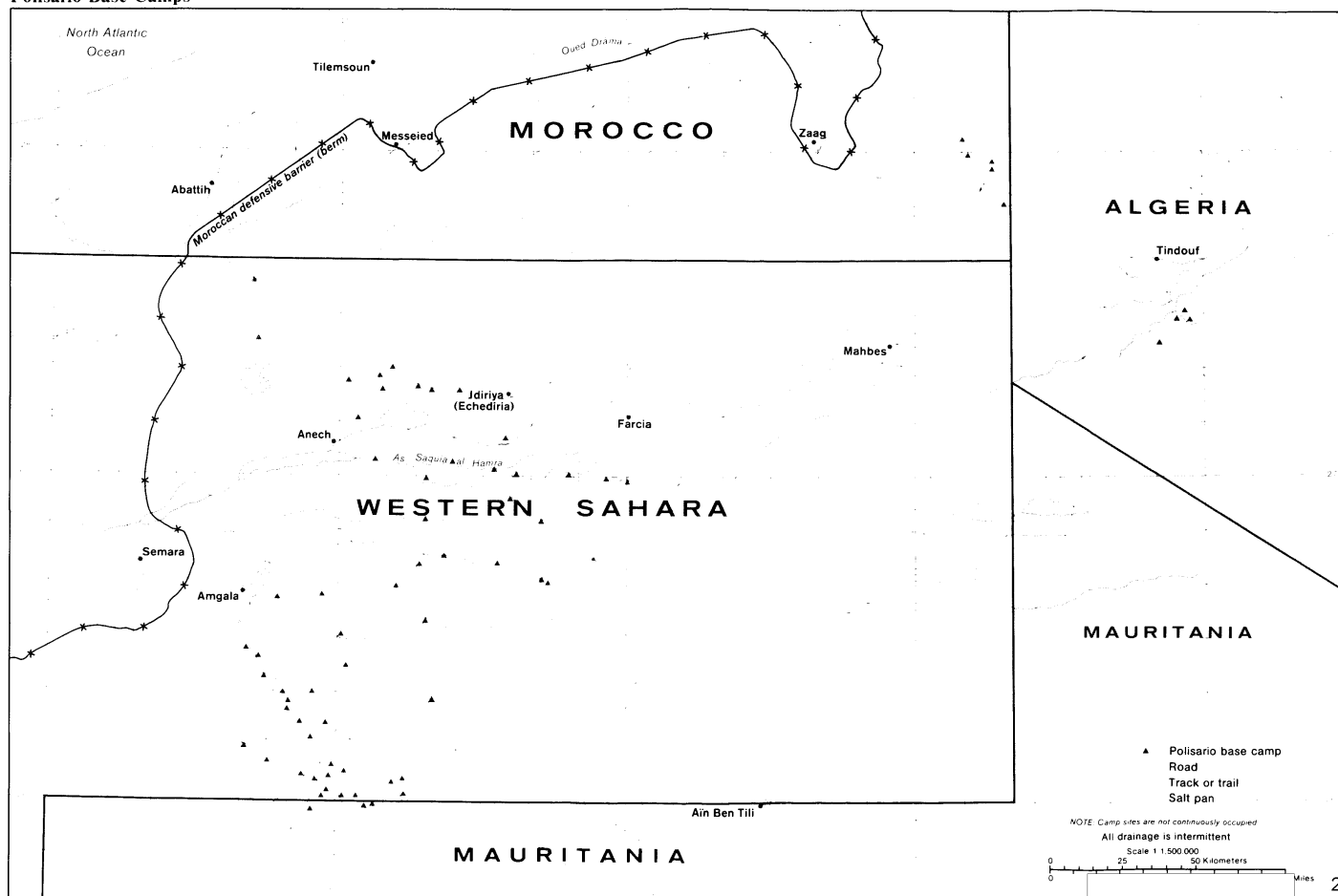
Table 3
OAU Treatment of the Western Sahara Dispute, June 1981-February 1982

	Recommendation	Reactions
("Nairobi I") 18th Assembly of OAU heads of state and government 24-28 June 1981	Recognizes King Hassan's promise to organize referendum in Western Sahara.	Morocco: Implies self-determination a ballot option.
	Establishes committee of representatives from Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Tanzania to implement recommendations of former ad hoc committee on Western Sahara.	Ready for confirmatory referendum within three months.
	Recommends immediate cease-fire.	Needs assistance of UN and OAU to supervise referendum for which voter eligibility is determined by 1974 Spanish census.
	Requests meeting of implementation committee before end of August to plan for cease-fire and referendum.	Says Moroccan troops will not be withdrawn prior to referendum.
	Gives implementation committee, with participation of UN, authorization to take "all necessary measures" to guarantee general and fair referendum for self-determination.	Polisario: Direct talks with Morocco must precede cease-fire.
		Moroccan troops have to leave Sahara before referendum and withdraw to distance of 150 kilometers from border.
		Dismantle Moroccan administration prior to vote.
		Exiled Saharans must return before vote.
		Algeria: Moroccan troops and administration must be withdrawn.
		Fixed dates for cease-fire and referendum needed; Morocco and Polisario must agree.
		Recalls June 1979 OAU meeting recommended five-state committee to define modalities and supervise organization of referendum.
("Nairobi II") Chiefs of State Implementation Committee on Western Sahara 24-26 August 1981	Referendum options will be independence or integration with Morocco.	Morocco: The Moroccans will organize the referendum.
	All South Saharouis in the Spanish census who are now 18 years of age will be eligible to vote.	UN peacekeeping force is unacceptable.
	In determining the voting population the UNHCR will also be consulted, and internationally recognized rates of growth will be factored in.	Will not negotiate cease-fire directly with Polisario.
	Calls for impartial interim administration.	Polisario: Moroccan forces must leave Western Sahara and remain 150 kilometers from the border.
	Interim administration will work with existing Moroccan administration and be assisted by OAU and/or UN peacekeeping forces.	Polisario Front must be part of peacekeeping force.
	Opposing forces will be confined to base during cease-fire and referendum.	Algeria: Moroccan forces should be withdrawn. If any are allowed to stay, should be only a small force.
		The international peacekeeping force must maintain order.
		A neutral interim administration must be established.
		A new census to identify voters is needed. Commission of interim administrators, UNHCR, Algeria, and Mauritania can oversee project.
("Nairobi III") Chiefs of State Implementation Committee on Western Sahara 8-9 February 1982	Comprehensive cease-fire to be fixed by committee on advice of chairman after consultations with all concerned parties.	Morocco: Polisario is not a party to the conflict.
	Peacekeeping force and/or military observer group to supervise cease-fire.	Moroccan military and administration must remain through referendum.
	Opposing forces to be confined to base.	Rejects referendum under international control.
	Interim administration to have legislative and administrative power.	Polisario: Emphasizes need for direct negotiations with Morocco.
	Determination of voter lists must begin.	Criticizes "failure" of OAU implementation to force Morocco to negotiate.
	Final result of referendum must be ratified by implementation by OAU assembly and UNGA.	Challenges good faith of implementation committee.
		Algeria: Any agreements must be between Polisario and Morocco, not Algeria and Morocco.

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Polisario Base Camps



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